

**NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT**  
**PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
**PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)  
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

**1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE** *(must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)*

Street address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postal code: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Current/Common Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Building

Structure

Site

Object

**4. PROPERTY INFORMATION**

Condition:     excellent     good     fair     poor     ruins

Occupancy:     occupied     vacant     under construction     unknown

Current use: \_\_\_\_\_

**5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

*Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.*

**6. DESCRIPTION**

*Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.*

**7. SIGNIFICANCE**

*Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.*

Period of Significance (from year to year): from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: \_\_\_\_\_

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: \_\_\_\_\_

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: \_\_\_\_\_

Original owner: \_\_\_\_\_

Other significant persons: \_\_\_\_\_

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

*Please attach a bibliography.*

**9. NOMINATOR**

Organization \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name with Title \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, and Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

Nominator  is  is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: \_\_\_\_\_

Correct-Complete  Incorrect-Incomplete Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Notice Issuance: \_\_\_\_\_

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

Designated  Rejected

# 415 N. 53<sup>rd</sup> Street: The Ethel Hedgemon Lyle House

## 5. Boundary Description

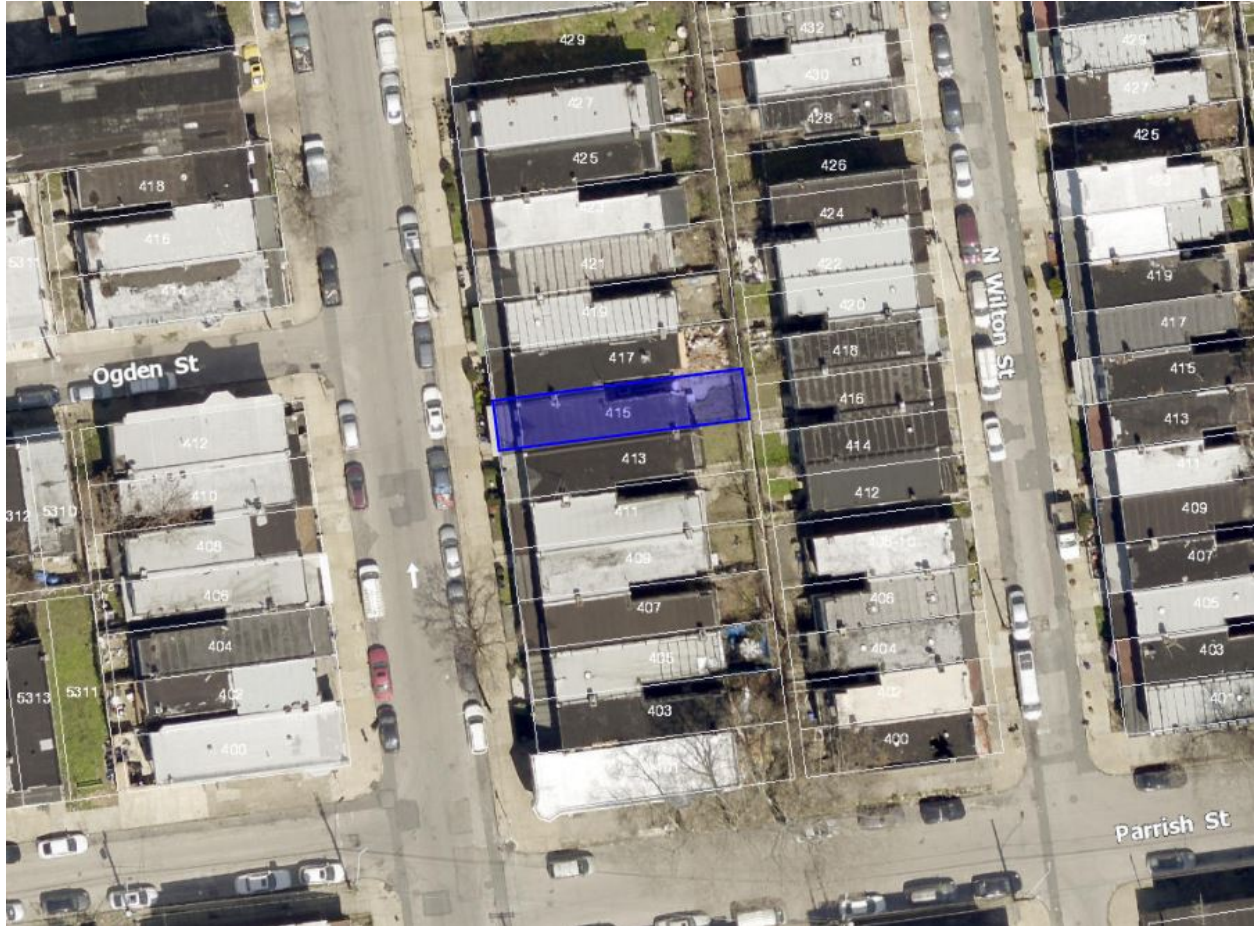


Figure 1. The boundary identifying the parcel at 415 N. 53rd Street. Source: Atlas.

Situate on the East side of 53rd Street at the distance of 362.5 feet Southward from the South side of Westminster Avenue in the 44<sup>th</sup> Ward of Philadelphia city, City of Philadelphia, County of Philadelphia Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Containing in front or breadth on the said 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, 16 feet and extending of that width in length or depth Eastward between parallel lines at right angles with the said 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, 80 feet to a certain 4 feet wide alley leading from said Westminster Avenue to Seneca Street and communicating with two other 4 feet wide alleys extending eastward into Wilton Street.

## 6. Description



Figure 2. Front façade of 415 N. 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, December 2022, Cyclomedia.

The property at 415 N. 53<sup>rd</sup> Street is a two-story Queen Anne-style brick rowhouse located between Westminster Street to the north and Parrish Street to the south. The building shares party walls with similar two-story brick row houses on either side.

The front façade faces west on 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and is set on a raised foundation five steps above grade and features a light orange brick finish, a one-story front porch, and a decorative peaked cornice. There is a single low rectangular basement window set in the light brown raised foundation below the porch. The first story features a brown wood panel door with a small light set in the south end beside two evenly spaced sash windows to its north. There is a large metal awning affixed to the front of the porch roof which has a peaked front with a simple fanned decorative detail set in its center positioned at the porch roofline centered above the door to this home and its neighbor to the south. The second story extends above the porch roof and features two evenly spaced sash windows with white stone sills and roughcut wide stone lintels. Each window features a metal awning that matches that one on the porch. There is a line of decorative brick corbeling below a large decorative cornice with a central peak. There are additional molded plant motif decorations applied to the center of the peak and in five evenly spaced panels along the cornice line, separated by a thin band of egg and dart molding. There are two decorative brackets at each end of the cornice with small decorative caps, both set on projecting decorative brick corbeling that extends partway down the second story windows.

The sides of the building share party walls with the rowhouses to either side and are not visible. The rear façade faces an internal alleyway and is not visible from a public right of way. It features an extended ell with a door at the first floor to access the rear yard and two rectangular sash windows on the second floor. There is an additional window on each floor in the recessed portion of the rear beside the ell.

The building is set in a row of matching homes that extends the whole length of the east side of the block with one gap for access to the rear alley in the center.

## **7. Statement of Significance**

The property at 415 N. 53<sup>rd</sup> Street is historically significant and should be listed individually on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The property satisfies Criterion for Designation A: "Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past." Specifically, the property is associated with the life of Ethel Hedgemon Lyle, as her home for most of her adult life from 1924 until her death in 1950. Lyle was the founder of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority (AKA) at Howard University in 1908, the first sorority founded by and for African American women and one of the largest sororities in the nation today. In addition, she was an influential member of the city's African American community in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and had an almost 40-year long career as an educator in the city.

### **Neighborhood Context:**

West Philadelphia grew at a somewhat slower rate compared to the main portion of the city east of the Schuylkill and remained largely rural until the middle to later parts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For quite some time the area served as the location for the country retreats of some of the city's elite, who would escape their comparably crowded townhomes for the fresh air of the country on the other side of the river. The Schuylkill itself acted as a major barrier that slowed the growth west of the city as the only way across it was at three ferry points which connected with main roads headed for distant locales such as Lancaster and Baltimore. Floating bridges were first constructed at Schuylkill crossings during the Revolution and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the roads in the area being improved by various turnpike corporations which led to a permanent bridge being constructed at Market Street in 1805.

Small trade centers popped up around the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and, for the first time, brought a small amount of commercial activity to the area around the turnpikes. At the same time, certain types of manufacturing that favored less crowded neighborhoods located themselves in the area and steadily grew over time. During the first half of the 19th century, some of the large landowners began development of small residential “villages” such as Hamilton Village and Mantua, though these were still targeted at a more upper-class clientele. At the same time, both educational institutions and charitable organizations saw the space west of city as an ideal place to locate themselves. The Blockley Almshouse was built in 1836 on land overlooking the river and the Pennsylvania Hospital’s Institute for the Insane was located on land just to the north of Market Street. The Woodlands Cemetery was established in 1841 on the old estate of William Hamilton as part of the rural cemetery movement that sought to bring more space and fresh air to the practice of mourning. By 1844, the area around the Market Street bridge was incorporated as the Borough of West Philadelphia and featured numerous taverns, inns, and other businesses that reflected growing urbanization.

By the time the city of Philadelphia incorporated with many of its surrounding communities in 1854, West Philadelphia featured a mixture of industry, commerce, residential homes, and rural farms and access across the Schuylkill was steadily improving. Over of the latter half of the 19th century, the area gradually emerged as a suburb of the city proper and was connected to it via various stagecoach and later streetcar and train lines. Developers and speculators followed the developing transportation infrastructure and built rows of fashionable twin and townhouses to appeal to the growing professional classes of the city who wanted to live in a more open area and could commute to the city center for work. By the 1870s and 80s, these developments gradually began to be scaled down and aimed to attract a more working-class population and signified that the growth of commerce and industry in the region supported the construction of homes for workers near their places of business. The less prestigious workers were generally pushed to the fringe areas in neighborhoods like Mill Creek and by the end of the century, West Philadelphia had developed into an urban area that could stand on its own with a variety of residences, businesses, schools, churches, and everything else that the community could need.<sup>1</sup> It was around this time, between 1895 when the row is shown as blank on Baist’s Atlas and 1901 when it appears on a Bromley Atlas, that the row of homes along the 400 block of N. 53<sup>rd</sup> Street was constructed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia Historic Register Nomination for 4800-14 Lancaster Ave, Our Mother of Sorrows Catholic Church.

<sup>2</sup> Most of this history was taken from the West Philadelphia Community History Center hosted online by the University of Pennsylvania <https://westphillyhistory.archives.upenn.edu/history>



Figure 3. Ethel Hedgemon Lyle.

#### Ethel Hedgemon Lyle:

Ethel Hedgemon was born in 1887 in St. Louis, Missouri to parents Albert and Marie Alice (nee Hubbard) Hedgemon. She attended school in that city and in 1904, graduated from Sumner High School with honors and became the first student from her school to receive a scholarship to attend Howard University, a prestigious Historically Black University located in Washington DC.<sup>3</sup> It was in 1908 while at Howard that she, along with a small group of classmates, founded AKA. She was also president of the Young Professional and Student Education conference and in the choir at Howard. She graduated in 1909 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in liberal arts and proceeded to teach in Eufaula, Oklahoma for a time. She also taught at the Sumner Normal School in Oklahoma and was the first African American female college graduate to earn a Teacher's Life Certificate from the Oklahoma Department of Education.<sup>4</sup> She also taught in Centralia, Illinois from 1910-11.

On June 21, 1911, Ethel Hedgemon married George Lyle, whom she had known and dated in high school and college. The couple moved to Philadelphia where Lyle gave birth to their only child, George, on March 20, 1912.<sup>5</sup> She resumed teaching in Philadelphia in 1921 and continued to do so until her

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<sup>3</sup> *Who's who in Colored America*. United States: Who's Who in Colored America Corporation. 1942. p. 334.

<sup>4</sup> "A Visionary Woman": Ethel Hedgemon Lyle. Archived October 8, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> *Who's who in Colored America*. United States: Who's Who in Colored America Corporation. 1942. p. 334.

retirement in 1948. By September 1924, she and George purchased the house at 415 N 53<sup>rd</sup> St.<sup>6</sup> Lyle was an active and influential member of her community. She was a founder of the Mother's Club of Philadelphia, a charter member of the West Philadelphia League of Women Voters, and a member of the Republican Women's Committee of the Fortieth Ward in 1919.<sup>7</sup> In 1937, the Mayor of Philadelphia appointed Lyle to chair the Committee of 100 Women, which planned the Sesquicentennial Anniversary of the Adoption of the US Constitution. During her post-college life in Philadelphia, Lyle continued to act as a driving force in AKA and served as national treasurer for the organization for more than 25 years.<sup>8</sup> She also founded the first alumnae chapter of the Sorority, the Omega Omega chapter, in 1926 which to this day provides scholarships, community grants, and other charitable services to the city.<sup>9</sup> Lyle passed away in 1950 in Philadelphia.

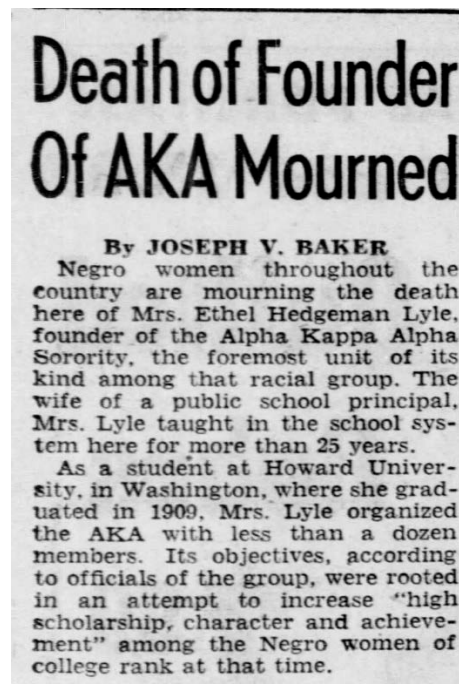


Figure 4. Clip from obituary of Ethel Hedgemon Lyle from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec 3, 1950

#### Alpha Kappa Alpha:

In 1907 at Howard University, Lyle led an effort to create a new sorority for women at the school. She was partially inspired by a faculty member, Ethel T. Robinson, who recounted to Lyle her own experiences of sorority life from her time at the Women's College at Brown University. At the time, no existing sororities permitted African American members and so Lyle decided to recruit likeminded classmates to establish a group on their own. In the fall of 1907, Lyle and group of eight other women

<sup>6</sup> City of Philadelphia Registry Plans, 61-N-A-4-C, line 106. Accessed from <https://epay.phila-records.com/>

<sup>7</sup> *Who's who in Colored America*. United States: Who's Who in Colored America Corporation. 1942. p. 334.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, Joseph V., "Death of Founder of AKA Mourned". *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 03 Dec 1950, Sun, Page 59

<sup>9</sup> Omega Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha, <https://akaomegaomegachapter.com/>. accessed 19 April 2023



presented their plan to the administration of Howard University for approval to found the organization. On January 15, 1908, the group held its first official meeting at Miner Hall.<sup>10</sup> Alpha Kappa Alpha steadily grew at Howard University over the years and on January 29, 1913, it became the first African American sorority to nationally incorporate, giving it license to found subordinate chapters at other schools. By 1921, AKA had established its first ten chapters at other institutions beginning with the University of Chicago in 1913.<sup>11</sup> Lyle continued to serve the sorority as its national treasurer from 1923 to 1946, helping guide it on a path of public service and fight for a variety of social causes. In honor of her role as founder, the sorority named Lyle as “Honorary Basileus” in 1926, the only member to be granted such a title.<sup>12</sup>

Alpha Kappa Alpha grew over the next several decades of its existence. On May 10, 1930, AKA formed the National Pan-Hellenic Council along with several other historically black fraternities and sororities. Founded partially as a result of white organizations not wanting to associate with the growing body of black Greek letter organizations, its stated purpose and mission upon foundation was “Unanimity of thought and action as far as possible in the conduct of Greek letter collegiate fraternities and sororities, and to consider problems of mutual interest to its member organizations.”<sup>13</sup> Also in the 1930s, the sorority sponsored initiatives to help poor rural populations in the South. In 1934, AKA member Ida Jackson established the Summer School for Rural Teachers to train Black educators in the Mississippi Delta. Jackson and AKA also helped found the Mississippi Health project in 1938 with Dr. Dorothy Boulding Ferrabee as its director, an initiative that aimed to bring health services and awareness to residents that did not have access to formal health care and became the nation’s first mobile health clinic that went on to assist upwards of 15,000 underserved people in the Mississippi Delta region.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1940s-60s, AKA focused on a variety of civil and human rights projects. It created the National Non-Partisan Lobby on Civil and Democratic Rights (NPC) in 1938, the first full time congressional lobbying group for minority rights. In 1939, AKA became the first sorority to apply for life membership in the NAACP. In 1948, AKA replaced the NPC with the American Council on Human Rights (ACHR) which continued to make recommendations to congress concerning civil rights legislation until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>15</sup> ACHAR filed civil cases in amicus curiae related to numerous notable court decisions regarding civil rights including in *Boling v. Sharp* and *Brown v. Board of Education*<sup>16</sup>. When Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the sorority decided to create a job corps and received a \$4 million grant to do so in Cleveland in 1965. The Cleveland Job Corps provided training in job and educational skills to young women in Cleveland<sup>17</sup>. In

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<sup>10</sup> Alpha Kappa Alpha website, <https://aka1908.com/about/history/>

<sup>11</sup> Alpha Kappa Alpha website, <https://aka1908.com/about/history/>

<sup>12</sup> Alpha Kappa Alpha website, <https://aka1908.com/about/founders/>

<sup>13</sup> About the National Pan-Hellenic Council". [nphchq.org](http://nphchq.org). Archived from the original on December 12, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> "Alpha Kappa Alpha National Programs". Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. Archived from the original on June 30, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Parks, Gregory S. ““Lifting as We Climb: The American Council on Human Rights and the Quest for Civil Rights.” *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law*. V. 25, i. 3, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> “Ivy Leaf: 1921–1998 Microfiche Guide” p. 15 (xv), the United Publications of America, 2000. Archived February 29, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> "Alpha Kappa Alpha National Programs". Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. Archived from the original on June 30, 2007.

the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, AKA established programs and provided funds supporting a variety of charitable causes ranging from fighting poverty in Africa to establishing after school mentoring programs.



## *The Original Nine*

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### **Ethel Hedgemon (Lyle)**

Figure 5. Illustration of Lyle from the AKA website, <https://aka1908.com/about/founders/>

#### Conclusion:

Ethel Hedgemon Lyle's contributions to both Philadelphia and the nation through her founding of and continued work through the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority clearly identify her as a significant figure deserving of recognition. As a young woman at Howard University, she possessed the insight to identify the need for a social organization open to African American women where none had existed before. Furthermore, under her continued leadership, AKA quickly grew beyond a simple social club into a force that advocated for some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest achievements in social justice and civil rights causes. Lyle and AKA helped bring medical care to rural underserved Black communities, established numerous job and employment programs to expand opportunities where little had been offered before, and actively fought as part of the civil rights movement in the United States. She was also an active member of her community locally in Philadelphia and was recognized by the city multiple times for her accomplishments. For her legacy, the Ethel Hedgemon Lyle House at 415 N. 53<sup>rd</sup> Street is eligible for inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places under Criterion A.

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